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Lake St. Clair cleanup proposal in works

Groups meet to prepare a management strategy

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BY DAN SHINE

FREE PRESS ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER

The running joke about Lake St. Clair is that it's not a Great Lake but it is a good lake.

That secondary status has caused the lake to be overlooked when it came to cleanup efforts, some environmentalists say. There is a plan in place to clean the Great Lakes, and now one is being formed for Lake St. Clair.

Representatives from federal, state and local agencies from the United States and Canada -- along with citizen groups -- have been meeting to formulate a comprehensive management plan for the lake and the St. Clair River.

"While all that focus is on the Great Lakes, you hear more about Lake St. Clair and its beach closings and fish die-offs," said Mike Donahue, president and chief executive officer of the Great Lakes Commission, which is coordinating the effort with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies.

"Lake St. Clair is like the unwanted stepchild," he said. "Some said it was too small for a lake-wide management plan."

At 26 miles long, 24 miles wide and with an average depth of 10 feet, Lake St. Clair is relatively small when compared with the five Great Lakes. But 1.5 million fish are caught annually in Lake St. Clair -- about one-third of

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the Great Lakes' total.

The lake also provides habitat for fish and migrating waterfowl, and drinking water for 5 million people. The lake is important for shipping and recreational boating, which generate local revenue.

The idea for a comprehensive plan began to take shape a few years ago when several agencies started talking about the lake's problems. They also recognized that there were several community groups focused on improving a certain river or part of the lake that had never united.

U.S. Rep. David Bonior, a Mt. Clemens Democrat, got funding for the plan as part of the Water Resources Development Act of 1999. A project management team was formed last July. It met in September and November, and outlined the plan.

Technical workgroups, who are to meet this winter and spring, feature agency staffers who have expertise in the topic they will tackle. The workgroups will be responsible for drafting the management plan.

A draft is scheduled to be ready in July and released to the public in September. The final plan, which also will draw from earlier studies such as the 1997 Macomb County Blue Ribbon Commission on Lake St. Clair, is expected to be released in February 2003.

"Federal agencies are collaborating on this; local groups are collaborating; Canadians are getting together on this," said Colette Luff, water resource planner for the Corps.

Luff said some projects could get money from the Clean Michigan Initiative or the federal Clean Water Fund.

Doug Martz, chair of the Macomb County Water Quality Board, said he is glad to see the lake finally getting some attention. Martz, who also heads the St. Clair Channel Keepers, said it is too early to predict how successful the plan will be but is pleased to see so many agencies involved.

"We do need the Canadians at the table, and they have been active so far," he said.

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